

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Trust in American Government

Prior to the Nixon administration, pollsters and the media devoted little attention to the amount of trust Americans placed in the federal government, because trust was not a prominent issue of public discussion. The American public focused on other, more visible issues. In the forty years prior to 1980, the United States focused on wars in Europe and the Pacific and the Korean conflict. The threat of communism and the Cold War with the Soviet Union captured Americans' attention in the post-WWII era. Through these periods, Americans united with their government against the enemies that threatened them – fascism, communism, etc. In general, whether or not to trust the government was an uncommon topic of public discussion. However, after the end of the Vietnam War, the uncovering of the Watergate scandal, and the rise of investigative journalism in the 1970s, Americans were jarred from this state of complacency. The American public was forced to ask, “Can I trust the government?”

On its surface, public cynicism seems to undermine government because democratic governments are a creation of the citizenry they rule. How can a democratic government avoid dissolution if the citizenry that created it does not trust it? Such a context demands that the citizenry afford the government their loyalty, thereby legitimizing the government's authority. While I will more closely examine the nature of democracy in Chapter 2, it suffices here to say that perhaps the most tangible correlate of trust in the American federal government is the citizenry's response to its highly visible chief executive and national symbol – the President of the United States of America.

1.2 Presidential Campaigns

While equally important to the fields of sociology and political science, this study is of particular interest to the expanding field of political consultation. Long before millions of Americans flock to their polling places to select the next leader of the free world, a large group of consultants, managers, volunteers, and others have already begun promoting political candidates for the esteemed office. While their jobs entail everything from advertising to grassroots; fundraising to issues management, of vital importance is the management of the electorate's feelings. The goal for any election campaign is to help its candidate develop an image to which the electorate will respond warmly. A question of debate, however, is whether this kind of affect is important. Consultants have asked, "Is cultivating public affect toward our candidate really that important? At the end of the day, doesn't the electorate see past their own feelings to evaluate and vote based on our candidate's competence?"

This study examines the effects of persons' affect toward the president and their perceptions of the health of the national economy on public trust in the federal government. This research is important because it adds to the "style versus substance" debate in the world of politics – a subject of marked importance among political consultants and others. For years now, the media, the public, and academics have pondered over the question of whether people trust (and elect) politicians because of their record and merit or because people feel good about them. That is, do we trust presidents because they have demonstrated competence in successfully managing national issues such as the economy? Or do we trust them because they come across as having important, endearing qualities (e.g., honesty, trustworthiness, genuineness, humor, panache) that make us feel positively toward them?

While many studies focus on image construction, political campaigns, and trust in government, little literature has examined the effects of persons' affect toward the president and economic circumstances on the public's trust in the government. For this study I have chosen to focus on economic circumstances because it often is an important campaign issue. Economic circumstances – or for the purpose of this study, individual perceptions of the state of the economy – are a tangible and important measure of how well the government is providing for nation's welfare. The effects of this variable will be compared with those of persons' affect toward the president. The data for this study are drawn from the National Election Study (1980 through 2000). I will examine which factor – affect toward the president or perceptions of the national economy – has a stronger effect on trust in the federal government.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Trust, Legitimacy, and Democracy

As found in any common dictionary, the word ‘trust’ refers to the firm reliance on the integrity, ability, or character of a person or thing. For the purpose of this study, trust refers to a citizenry’s assured reliance on the ability, integrity, strength, character, and honesty of government. The importance of trust in any society cannot be understated. Without it, social systems of organization cannot function because no one can anticipate others’ behavior (i.e., there is no normative behavior). As we act in accordance with the written and unwritten rules of our society, we trust that those around us will behave in accordance with these understandings as well. Niklas Luhmann (1979) explained:

Trust reduces social complexity by going beyond available information and generalizing expectations of behaviour in that it replaces missing information with an internally guaranteed security. It thus remains dependent on other reduction mechanisms developed in parallel with it, for example those of law, of organization, and, of course, those of language, but cannot, however, be reduced to them. Trust is not the sole foundation of the world; but a highly complex but nevertheless structured conception of the world could not be established without a fairly complex society, which in turn could not be established without trust (1979:93-94).

Government is an example of such a “reduction mechanism.” It reduces social complexity through the creation of ground rules – establishing laws, imposing a system of organization, etc. But the mere creation of rules is not sufficient in American democracy. Our style of democracy demands an additional requirement –the governing body making the rules must have popular authorization to do so.

Before the American Revolution, philosophers like John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that a government’s authority is legitimate insofar as it serves the interests of its citizenry. Both he and Locke argued that humans are innately free beings. In a State of

Nature unconstrained by social laws and dictums, humans remain free. However, since humans do not live in mutual isolation from one another, they must live together in a society. Civilized society, then, contains an inherent problem: how do humans retain their innate freedom while living with others who may use force or coercion to impinge on their freedom? Both Locke and Rousseau argued that the people must form a social contract, agreeing to create a system of governance under which everyone's individual freedom will be protected.¹ Locke ([1690] 1986) made it clear that the government is beholden to the people who created it, having authority over them only insofar as it protects and preserves their welfare. If the government fails to serve its peoples' interests, the people have a right – even a duty – to dissolve it.

Public trust lies at the very heart of a government's existence. If a citizenry does not trust its government to do what is right, then change in government leadership can be expected. The type of change depends on the prevalence and the duration of dissatisfaction. In the most extreme example, if a government has obtained a monopoly on its power, free of checks and balances, and alienated its people, then the stage has been set for revolution or structural overhaul. Likewise, if cynicism is spread over a long period of time, it may prompt the citizenry to challenge the legitimacy of the government's authority (Easton 1975, Erber and Lau 1990). On the other hand, if few are dissatisfied, then change is less likely to occur because the majority of people believe the government is serving their interests. The cases that lie between these two extremes illustrate why public cynicism is functional to a democratic institution. Such mistrust and skepticism are functional because they promote electoral and social change. As more people become dissatisfied, change becomes more likely. Thus, the will of the majority prevails and democracy serves its intended purpose.

¹ This discussion prompted Rousseau to make his oft-recited declaration of civilized society, "Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains" (1969:2).

2.2 Legitimation Crisis

The discussion of legitimate authority continued and broadened long after the times of Locke and Rousseau. Perhaps the most influential modern work on governmental legitimacy is German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas's *Legitimation Crisis* (1975). As discussed earlier, without legitimacy, governments run the risk of losing the citizenry's trust and of being replaced or overthrown by the governed. In *Legitimation Crisis*, Habermas analyzed the multiple kinds of "crises" that can develop in society. Habermas broadly defined a crisis as, "the phase of an illness in which it is decided whether or not the organism's self-healing powers are sufficient for recovery" (1975:1). In terms of a living organism, a state of crisis exists when that organism faces a situation that determines whether they live or die (e.g. starvation, asphyxiation). However, Habermas also extended this concept to social institutions like government. Political, economic, and social structures face states of crisis when they lack the things they need to continue to exist. When they lack the means to support themselves, they dissolve.

Figure 1 illustrates the interdependent nature of the relationship that exists among economic, political, and social spheres of a society. In this model, the political system drives the economic system through a number of steering performances that determine the economic climate (e.g., taxation, trade embargoes, etc). Likewise, the economic system helps shape the political system by providing it with the money it needs to continue functioning. The money and power that the political system receives is relayed to the socio-cultural system in the form of laws, social programs, and other socio-political programs designed to help people with their daily lives. Depending on how well the political system meets the socio-cultural system's needs, the socio-cultural system will afford the political system more or less loyalty in order to

legitimize it. The last relationship Figure 1 illustrates is a reciprocal relationship between the economic and socio-cultural systems representing employment, consumerism, and other practices that directly relate the economy to a citizenry. Given the interrelated nature of this model, if one system fails to meet the needs and requirements of another system, all relationships are affected and a crisis occurs, jeopardizing the stability of the entire model.

According to Habermas, a legitimation crisis exists when the members of the socio-cultural system (i.e., the citizenry) fail to put faith or trust in the political system (i.e., government). By depriving the political system of its mass loyalty, the socio-cultural system has rendered the political system illegitimate and, ipso facto, powerless. The political system is then reformed through elections, or in a much more dramatic scenario, the citizenry revolts and overthrows its government. Just as the human body cannot live without food or water, a democratic government cannot exist without mass support and trust.

American democracy cannot function without trust in the government because of trust's relationship to legitimacy. Americans must trust that the government is serving in their best interests – that government is protecting their individual freedoms surrendered in the social contract – or else the government is illegitimate. If a government is deemed illegitimate, then the citizenry will withdraw its loyalty and trust, sending the government into a state of crisis, resulting in the government's dissolution and/or reform.

2.3 Who Is Trusted?

The Presidential Administration. Having established the importance of public trust in government, one may examine the players involved in this relationship. The first question is, “who is trusted?” When someone expresses trust or mistrust in the government, it can be unclear

exactly to whom he or she is referring. Are they referring to their senator, their president, their state legislator, or someone else? Jack Citrin and Donald Green (1986) explored this question by examining levels of public trust during the Reagan Administration. They found that when they controlled for respondents' personal feelings toward President Reagan, party identification exerted no significant influence over trust in government. Even in a partisan divide, presidential image determined trust in government. "When Americans express trust or mistrust in 'government' their answers largely reflect their feelings about the incumbent national administration" (Citrin and Green 1986:432).

The President as the Personification of Government. The role of the executive holds a unique position in American culture. Whether it is the CEO of a corporation or the President of the United States, executives demonstrate power over the institution they oversee by making decisions, guiding policy, and establishing precedents. What is most pertinent to this study, however, is that executives become the embodiment of the institution itself. Just as a CEO becomes a symbol of his company, the President of the United States becomes a symbol of the federal government; a "Caesar among centurions" (Califano, Jr. 1975:80). He effectively personifies American ideals and values. Thomas Cronin and Michael Genovese beautifully describe this presidential function:

The presidency serves our basic need for a visible and representative national symbol to which we can turn with our hopes and aspirations. The president has become an icon who embodies the nation's self-understanding and self-image... The president is at once our national hero and national scapegoat (Cronin and Genovese 2004:147).

Given the president's crucial symbolic role, the importance of public affect toward him to establishing their trust in government becomes even clearer.

The Imperial Presidency. In addition to his symbolic prowess, the president draws public attention by exercising his tangible executive powers. The Constitution grants and allows the president several broad powers that make his position even more visible and accountable to the American public (e.g., executive orders, national security directives, police actions, proclamations, executive agreements, etc). The number of unchecked powers the president holds and departments he oversees (e.g., the NSC, CIA, Cabinet departments, etc) reinforce his status as a national focus and symbol of government.

Since the creation of the office, academics, scholars, legislators, and others have debated the question of whether the American president has too much power. Arguably the most popular and influential work in the debate is *The Imperial Presidency* (1979), Arthur Schlesinger's analysis of the historical abuse of presidential power written after Vietnam and Watergate. While some rebutted Schlesinger's analysis/argument, contending that Congress has ultimately kept the Oval Office in check (Koenig 1981), over time, more academics began to write in line with Schlesinger's argument, citing actions taken by the Reagan administration in Central America and the Iran-Contra scandal (Sharpe 1987) as well as the events that lead the United States into Kosovo in 1995 (Banks and Straussman 1999).

The power the president wields by virtue of the Constitution is only part of a larger picture, however. The president's power to mobilize public opinion and support is not constitutionally granted, but is undeniable. One need look no further than 2002 when George W. Bush made the case for war against Iraq, citing intelligence from the FBI, CIA, and foreign intelligence services that the regime of Saddam Hussein posed an imminent threat to the United States. In this instance, the president did not unilaterally commit troops to the region. Instead, he made a case for preemptive war, convincing the American public to support his policy and

persuading legislators in Congress to vote for military action in Iraq. We see then, how both the president's constitutional influence and symbolic influence over foreign and domestic policy reaffirms his role as the personification of government.

2.4 Why Do We Trust?

Affect Toward the President. This study examines two factors that influence persons' trust in the federal government: affect toward the president and perceptions of the national economy. As aforementioned, Citrin and Green (1986) argue the importance of affect toward the president in garnering public trust: "The public has certain expectations about presidential character, and the incumbent's ability to project an image that conforms to these expectations can enhance the level of support for the government in general" (p. 432). So long as a president or candidate can endear himself to the voting public, he can blunt the negative effects of domestic policy failures, foreign policy debacles, and scandal. Given this, it is clear that it is not the image itself that is so vital so much as it is the electorate's perception and *affect toward* that image that determines genuine approval.

Many of the trappings and symbols of the presidency make bolstering a president's image easier. For example, throughout history, crises have been a theater in which presidents have effectively magnified their trustworthiness. During times of crisis or unease, a president can enhance his or her image as a concerned, good-hearted, and genuine citizen by visiting crisis sites and connecting to the people affected by the event. While this would hold true for any person in the United States, what makes this activity so touching and awe-inspiring for the public is the simple fact that it is the president and not an "everyday person."

Many presidents have successfully used their status and symbolic prowess to allay the fears and boost the morale of their citizenry. During the Three Mile Island nuclear accident in 1979, President Jimmy Carter demonstrated how a president's presence at the site of a disaster can make the people around them feel safer and more secure by making a special visit to Pennsylvania, spending time with residents and concerned citizens. Ronald Reagan, remembered for his successful utilization of television during his presidency, demonstrated strength and resolve during the Cold War through his well-crafted metaphor of a bear in the woods. The analogy between the bear in the woods and the power of the Soviet Union was brilliant in its simplicity. Easy for any American to understand, it was a message of unwavering strength and bravery that made Americans feel more secure and trusting of their Commander-in-Chief. Most recently, President George W. Bush demonstrated his strength, conviction, and compassion after the 9/11 attacks in 2001 by speaking to the recovery teams and people of New York via a bullhorn amidst the rubble of the World Trade Center (Farragher and Mishra 2001). His status as a national symbol produced the sense of wonder that surrounded the event. At the same time, his folksy, heartfelt resolve, projected through a common bullhorn, allowed him to appear as a genuine, trustworthy guardian and veritable "everyman."

While an electorate must perceive an incumbent president as trustworthy to ensure his reelection, such an image is also equally important in getting elected to the office in the first place. As the power of political parties declines and political campaigns become more candidate-centered, presidents are elected with an eye to their personality and personal characteristics. "In some elections and for some candidates, voters may look for honesty and trust and feel that if they pick a good person, the individual will make sound decisions on the issues that affect them" (Kenski, Aylor, and Kenski 2002:226).

This phenomenon can be explained by the concept of charismatic authority. In 1921 German sociologist, economist, and political scientist Max Weber published the highly influential *Economy and Society*. In it, he examined different types of legitimate authority and domination in society. Weber argued that in order to dominate a group of people, those people must have some interest vested in their domination by a governing executive or body (e.g., economic interests, security interests, tradition). Whatever the interest, each provides some form of guise for legitimacy.

The type of legitimate authority that applies here is charismatic authority. Charismatic authority exists when the subordinate group submits authority to the dominant group because of their “exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character” (Weber [1921] 1978:215). Affect is a vehicle for legitimacy in charismatic authority. The same process can be seen when citizens vote for a candidate based on that candidate’s endearing characteristics and qualities.

Economic Issues. But how far can politicians go on public affect alone? Certainly somewhere they must demonstrate some level of competence in catering to the needs of their constituency. Past researchers have argued that Americans are more issue-driven in their electoral decisions (Miller 1974, Miller, Goldenberg, and Erbring 1979). They argue that cynicism is the result of policy dissatisfaction, which leads to the desire to “throw the bums out” (i.e., to remove incumbent officials from office through electoral means).

Economic conditions weigh heavily in molding voters’ political judgments (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000), but how can one measure perceptions of the economy? There are several measures of economic success, including the fullness of one’s own pocketbook and the economic wellbeing of one’s social group. Prior to 1980, the National Election Study asked respondents to comment on the economic wellbeing only of themselves and their families. Historically,

however, the most important factor to voters is their assessment of the national economy as a whole (Kinder et al 1989, Funk and Garcia-Monet 1997). As Hetherington (1996) and others (Shah et al 1999) demonstrate, though, the media's role in framing economic conditions is a significant factor in constructing the public's perception of the economy's wellbeing. So any measure of economic attitudes should be analyzed with caution and not taken at face value.

2.5 Who Trusts?

Policy Dissenters. I have identified who individuals trust/distrust in the government, but who trusts or distrusts the government? Why may particular groups trust or distrust the government? Perhaps one of the most obvious theories is that distrust is the result of policy dissatisfaction. Some research suggests that distrust is higher among those who feel their values are not represented by government policies (Miller, Goldenberg, and Erbring 1979). This seems logical. If individuals or groups feel alienated and ignored by their government, one may argue that they will not afford a high level of trust to the government. This line of argument falls in congruence with Locke and Rousseau's earlier conceptions of a representative government. People are not likely to trust an institution which they believe has an agenda divergent from the public interest.

Supporters of a Losing Candidate. Others have postulated that mistrust is a product of sour electoral grapes. Anderson and LoTempio (2002) found that mistrust is higher among those who voted for the losing candidate in an election. Some may feel that because their preferred candidate lost, their interests are being ignored. These voters may view the winning candidate with skepticism, which may lower their trust in the electoral process and in the government. Earlier it was discussed how a president and his administration are a personification of the

federal government as a whole. Therefore, the projection of negative feelings from one candidate to the government as a whole is plausible.

Federal Government Workers. Trust in the government may also be the product of personal ties to the institution. Brewer and Sigelman (2002) examined the role that employment with the government had on individuals' level of trust in the government. Using a survey of Washington, D.C. metropolitan-area residents, they found that employees at all levels of government "were more likely [than those not employed by the government] to believe that the federal government is efficient, uncorrupted, and well intentioned" (2002:630). They also found, however, that friends and family members of government employees did not trust the government more than other people. Put simply, the researchers found that "a confidence gap divides government employees from the rest of the public" (2002: 624).

Third-Party Voters. Those who don't trust the government may be less likely to vote for Democrats and Republicans as well. Increases in third-party voting can both explain (Koch 1998) and result in political mistrust (Peterson and Wrighton 1998, Hetherington 1999). Perhaps a more accurate statement would be that these people do not distrust the government so much as they distrust the two major parties running it. Third-party voters still express a faith in the political system by voting, but they voice their misgivings about major party platforms while endorsing other policies by voting for candidates running as independents or as representatives of any one of a number of political parties (e.g. Reform Party, Green Party, Constitutional Party, Libertarian Party).

Other Demographic Variables. Research suggests that several other variables influence one's level of trust in the federal government. Race, gender, education, and partisanship, in particular, are all significant predictors of trust in the federal government. African-Americans

and women, for example, tend to be more distrusting of the government (Abramson 1983, Kanter and Mirvis 1989, Brewer and Sigelman 2002). We must be careful with how we handle a variable like education, however. How a researcher measures education determines education's effect on trust in the government. While Brewer and Sigelman (2002) found that individuals with more education (in *years*) are more distrusting of the government, Moy and Scheufele (2000) found that those with higher *levels* of education are more trusting. These two studies do find, however, that trust is higher among self-identified liberals and less among Republicans.

2.6 The Influence of Affect Toward the President Versus Economic Issues

The goal of this research is to quantitatively examine which factor – affect toward the president or perceptions of the national economy – has been most influential in constructing public trust in government in the last twenty or so years. The findings show which of the two – feelings or issues – has a greater effect on the public's level of trust in the government. Taken separately, my first two hypotheses are (1) the more positive one's perceptions of the national economy, the greater their trust in the federal government and (2) the warmer one feels toward the president, the greater the trust in the federal government.

My final hypothesis has two parts. The first is that affect toward the president is a significant, positive indicator of trust in government even when controlling for perceptions of the economy. Additionally, though, I hypothesize that the standardized beta coefficient for affect toward the president will be stronger than the one for perceptions of the economy, indicating a stronger effect of the former on trust in government. I expect that over approximately 20 years, how the public feels about a president is a stronger factor than their assessments of the health of the national economy in predicting their trust in the federal government. A model of the

hypothesized relationship between these variables may be found in Figure 2. Perceptions of the economy and affect toward the president are both independent variables. Trust in government is the dependent variable.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Data

This research examines quantitative secondary data collected from the National Election Study (NES), which is conducted biannually by the University of Michigan. I analyze pre-election NES data from presidential election years between 1980 and 2000. In each of these years, identically worded questions asked respondents about their level of trust in the government, presidential image, and their perceptions of the national economy. The NES is designed to be representative all English-speaking, noninstitutionalized American adults (ages 18 and older). As presented in Table 1, of the 10,791 respondents interviewed from 1980 through 2000, just over 11 percent were African-American and 56 percent were female. About 80 percent had at least a high school diploma or GED equivalent while only 22.3 percent had earned a bachelor's degree or graduate degree. Finally, of these respondents, 26 percent identified themselves as Republicans, 37.6 percent as Democrats, and 36.4 percent identified themselves as either independents or as having no preference of political party. Tables 2 and 3 present means and standard deviations for variables in the study as well as a correlation matrix, respectively.

3.2 Measures

Dependent Variable

Trust in Federal Government. In this study, I measure individuals' trust in the federal government by constructing a "trust index". This trust index is composed of four questions from the NES that directly ask respondents what they believe to be the federal government's trustworthy/untrustworthy characteristics (Cronbach's alpha = 0.64). Each of these variables has been coded so that '0' represents the most distrustful response (listed first, below) with every

increasingly trustful response being coded '1', '2', etc. Trust index scores may range from 0 to 8 indicating the lowest and highest levels of trust, respectively ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.81$). In each presidential election year, the NES asked respondents (1) how much of the time they could trust the government to do what is right (*never, some of the time, most of the time, always*; $M = 1.38$), (2) whether they thought the government is run by big interests or for the benefit of all people (*few big interests, benefit of all*; $M = 0.53$), (3) how crooked public officials are (*quite a few, not very many, hardly any*; $M = 0.69$), and (4) how much taxpayer money the government wastes (*not much, some, a lot*; $M = 0.36$).

Independent Variables

Perceptions of the Economy. In order to gauge how individuals perceive the state of the national economy, I examine responses to a question that asks respondents to assess whether or not the economy has improved in the past year. Those who responded that the economy had gotten worse are coded '0'; those who said it had stayed about the same are coded '1'; and those who said it had gotten better are coded '2' ($M = 0.85$).

Affect Towards President. The National Election Study uses what it calls a "feeling thermometer" in order to measure respondents' feelings of warmth toward a presidential incumbent on a scale from 0 to 100. A number from 0 to 50 indicates lower approval and lesser feelings of warmth while a number from 50 to 100 indicates higher approval and greater feelings of warmth ($M = 59.35$).

Control Variables

I control for seven social demographic variables that may affect trust in government: age, gender, race, family income, education, party identification, and party of incumbent administration. Age is recorded as a continuous variable ($M = 45.59$). Gender is coded as a dummy variable with males as the comparison group ($M = .56$). Race is coded as a dummy variable with all races other than African American as the comparison group ($M = 0.12$). Family income is a continuous variable. Respondents reported their total family income (the total income of all family members in the household) to fall within certain income ranges. I have coded these responses to the midpoints of income ranges and have coded all other responses (e.g., *Refused*) as the mean. For the purposes of this study, an income of \$50,000 is represented by 50.00; an income of \$72,500 by 72.5 ($M = 112.60$). I have also included a dummy variable to measure whether an individual reported their income and have defined those having reported an income as my comparison group ($M = 0.14$). Education is measured at five levels, coded 0 to 4 (*less than high school, high school diploma or equivalent, some college, Bachelor's degree, graduate degree*, respectively; $M = 1.56$) and election year is coded as a set of dummy variables in order to measure change in trust over time, with 1980 as the comparison year.

In order to determine whether party identification has different effects on trust depending on whose party is in power of the presidency, I created a series of interaction terms that are designed to measure such an effect between the party of the incumbent president and respondents' party identification. After creating a series of dummy variables for 3 party identification categories (*Republican, Democrat, Independent/No Preference*)², I multiplied two of them – Democrat and Independent/No Preference – by another dummy variable that indicates whether a Republican president was in office at the time of the respondent's interview. This second variable uses Democratic administrations as the comparison group.

² 'Republican' is the omitted category for purposes of regression analysis.

Chapter 4: Findings and Results

4.1 Table Summary

Table 4 shows predictions of perceptions of the economy and affect toward the president in regression analyses. The first regresses perceptions of the economy on social demographic characteristics and interaction terms designed to measure the different effects of party identification, depending on the party of the incumbent administration. The second model regresses affect toward the president against these same variables.

Tables 5 and 6 show predictions of trust in government when perceptions of the economy and affect toward the president are included as independent variables. The only difference between Tables 5 and 6 are the comparison groups chosen for each series of statistical models. Table 5 uses Republican party identification and Democratic presidencies as its control groups while Table 6 uses Democratic party identification and Republican presidencies. With this exception, both tables' designs are identical. Model 1 regresses trust in the federal government on social demographic characteristics. Interaction terms are included in Model 2. Model 3 includes perceptions of the economy as a predictor of trust in government while Model 4 includes affect toward the president. Finally, Model 5 regresses trust in the government on all variables in the study – social demographic characteristics, interaction terms, perceptions of the economy, and affect toward the president.

4.2 Effects of Social Demographic Characteristics

Age, Race, and Gender. Age is found to have significant effects across all models except one.³ Older individuals feel more warmly toward the president ($b=.052, p<.01$) and trust the government more. The assertions made in previous studies (e.g., Abramson 1983, Kanter and

³ Age has no significant effect when regressed against perceptions of the economy in Table 4.

Mirvis 1989, Brewer and Sigelman 2002) that African Americans and women are more distrustful of the government are not supported by the findings in Tables 4 and 5. While race does not seem to be a significant predictor of trust in government, these data do suggest that African Americans are more likely to have more negative assessments of the economy ($b=-.075$, $p<.01$) and of the president ($b=-1.968$, $p<.05$). An explanation for this may be African Americans' greater likelihood (compared other races) of exposure to economic depression and disadvantage, as family income and our race dummy variable are negatively correlated (Pearson's $r=-.171$, $p<.01$).

Similarly, one may be able to explain women's negative assessments of the economy ($b=-.125$, $p<.001$). Women may have a different perception of the national economy for one of two reasons. First, family income and our gender variable are negatively correlated ($r=-.138$, $p<.01$), which indicates economic disadvantage (compared to men). Second, the majority of married women are charged with maintaining most of a household's finances. Their experiences paying bills and stretching paychecks may influence how they perceive the state of the national economy.

Education. The results in Tables 5 and 6 are consistent with Moy and Scheufele's (2000) finding that those with a higher level of education are more trusting of the government. A significant positive relationship exists across all models between people with higher levels of education and trust in government. Those individuals with higher education are also found to have more positive assessments of the economy ($b=.076$, $p<.001$) and less affect toward the president ($b=-1.052$, $p<.001$).

Family Income. One's family income significantly affects their worldview in each model of analysis. Regression analyses suggest that individuals with higher family incomes are less

trusting of the government across all models and have more negative perceptions about the health of the national economy ($b=-.001, p<.001$). A higher family income is also indicative of a significantly higher level of affect toward the president ($b=.014, p<.01$). Our dummy variable for reported income produces an interesting result as well. Model 1 in Table 4 suggests that individuals who did not report their income are significantly more likely to praise the condition of the national economy than those who did report their income ($b=.108, p<.001$). This seems odd considering our earlier finding that higher family incomes result in more negative perceptions of the economy. One possible explanation for this is that households that enjoy larger incomes may be less likely to report their income. So these negative assessments may hold true only to a certain higher point of income, at which point perceptions of the economy become more positive. Therefore, a graph of perceptions of the economy over a range of increasing family income values may be expected to resemble a 'U'.

Party Identification. One of the more interesting series of statistics presented in these tables relate to my variable for Republican incumbency and its relationship to my independent and dependent variables. All models suggest that trust in government is significantly higher among the population when a Republican is president than when a Democrat is. Also, both perceptions of the economy ($b=.524, p<.001$) and affect toward the president ($b=43.990, p<.001$) are significantly higher during Republican incumbencies.

Like any system of power in which competing interests come into conflict, our two primary political parties are often at odds with one another. Therefore, a natural assumption is that when one party controls the presidency, the other party may be more critical of the president, their economic policies, and less trusting of the government. Perhaps the best way to compare differences in trust among party identifiers is to visually compare the means for each group.

Figures 3 and 4 depict the mean differences in perceptions of the economy and affect toward the president respectively between Republicans, Democrats, and Independent/No Preference identifiers. As can be expected, during Republican presidencies, Republicans have more positive views of the health of the national economy while Democrats have more negative ones. Likewise, during Democratic presidencies, the reverse holds true with Democrats holding more positive assessments and Republicans more negative.

Perhaps the most interesting results regarding party identification are found when we examine the effects of party identification, presidents' party identification, and the interaction between the two on trust in government. Illustrations of these effects are found in Figures 5 through 8. Each corresponds to Models 2 through 5, respectively. Referring specifically to Models 2 and 4 in Table 6, we see a dramatic change in Democrats' trust in the government when controlling for their affect toward the president. When trust is regressed on social demographic characteristics, no significant difference exists between Democrats' trust in government during Democratic presidencies and Republican ones ($b = -.008, p > .05$). However, when controlling for social demographic characteristics and persons' affect toward the president, Democrats are significantly *less* likely to trust the government during Democratic presidencies than Republican ones ($b = -.495, p < .001$). On the other side of the aisle, we do not see this change for Republicans in Models 2 and 4 in Table 5. Compared to Democratic presidencies, during Republican presidencies, Republicans are significantly more likely to trust the government ($b = 1.008, p < .001$). Unlike Democrats, though, controlling for persons' affect toward the president does not erase this relationship among Republicans. Model 4 shows that such controls still leave Republicans significantly more trusting during Republican administrations than Democratic ones ($b = .283, p < .01$). I will discuss the implications of this in Chapter 5.

4.3 Effects of Perceptions of the Economy and Affect Toward the President

Perceptions of the Economy. The effects of persons' perceptions of the economy on trust in government can be found in Model 1 in Table 4 and Models 3 and 5 in Table 5. In each case, even when controlling for individual affect toward the president in Model 5, perceptions of the economy remains a significant, positive predictor of trust. My first hypothesis is supported. Those who have more positive views of the economy are more trusting of the government.

Affect Toward the President. Model 4 in Table 5 illustrates the relationship between persons' affect toward the president and their trust in government. Of initial interest here is the fact that affect toward the president eliminates the significance of our interaction terms. This suggests that persons' affect toward the president mediates the effects of the interaction between party identification and the incumbent president's party affiliation. Also, according to this model, affect toward the president is a significant, positive indicator of trust when controlling for social demographic variables ($b=.017, p<.001$). Thus my second hypothesis, too, is supported. Those who have a higher level of personal affect toward the president are significantly more likely to trust the government.

My final hypothesis – that affect toward the president is a significant, positive indicator of trust in government even when controlling for perceptions of the economy – is supported by Model 5 in Table 5. Both affect toward the president and perceptions of the economy prove to be statistically significant indicators of trust in the federal government. Additionally, it appears that my expectation is confirmed as well. Persons' affect toward the president explains more of the variance in trust than does perceptions of the national economy, as is evident by the greater R-squared value. Closer inspection reveals that affect toward the president has a standardized

Beta coefficient (.231) more than 1.5 times stronger than that of perceptions of the economy (.152). So while persons' perceptions of the economy are a significant factor in predicting their trust in the federal government, their affect toward the president has a stronger effect on such trust.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Implications

One may conclude from this study that Americans give significant weight both to matters of personal affect and matters of issues when calculating their trust in the government. The results of this study suggest, however, that Americans' trust in the federal government is impacted more strongly by their level of affect toward the president than by their perceptions of the national economy's health. One may reasonably infer, then, that when Americans evaluate their personal trust in the government, they rely slightly more heavily upon their "gut feelings" about their president than they rely upon their perceptions of the national economy's health. This is good news for public relations specialists and political consultants whose jobs are to manage presidents' personas.

Manipulating Affect. For most Americans, the results of this study are unsettling. It is a discomfoting thing to know that people make professions aimed at manipulating how we perceive our leaders in government. What is perhaps more unnerving is the fact that they are successful. The affect we afford politicians may be genuine, but are the images to which we are reacting equally pure? Common sense tells us that persons' perceptions of a politician are vitally important in getting the politician elected to office. Just as W.I. Thomas (1923) postulated in his concept of the "definition of the situation," if individuals define a situation as real, it is then real in its consequences. Likewise, if individuals *believe* a candidate to be honest, trustworthy, and a strong leader, then they will be more likely to cast their vote for that politician, regardless of whether the candidate actually possesses those characteristics.

This is the job of the political consultant – to create an "electable" image for their candidate. Because not every individual knows the candidates personally, the successful

manipulation of language and images (both of the candidate themselves and of the ideals they represent) will ultimately determine the election of the American president. This is not to say, however, that such manipulation creates an inherently unreal image of a candidate. “Image-making, no matter how manipulative, doesn’t replace reality; it becomes part of it. Images are not unreal simply because they are manufactured” (Blumenthal 1980:5).

The President’s Role in Government. In Chapter 4, I highlighted a difference among Republicans’ and Democrats’ trust in the federal government from one party’s administration to another. Controlling for persons’ affect toward the president produces an interesting result. Affect toward the president appears to suppress the effect that Democratic party identification has on trust in the federal government. Meanwhile, affect toward the president mediates the effect that Republican party identification has on trust in the federal government. An illustration of this phenomenon is illustrated in Figures 5 and 7 (corresponding to Models 2 and 4). This data suggests a difference between Republicans and Democrats in how each group views the president’s role in government – a matter of political culture.

The data in this study show us that Democrats’ trust in the federal government is contingent on their level of affect toward the president, regardless of the president’s party. Figure 5 shows that when we leave affect toward the president uncontrolled, Democrats’ trust in government is virtually the same. However, when we control for affect toward the president in Figure 7, Democrats’ trust in government during Democratic presidencies plummets to the point where they are significantly more trusting of the government during *Republican* administrations. This suggests that Democrats are more likely to see the president as “infused” into the government, continually working with other branches of government in a mutually dependent manner. From this perspective, the president’s central role in cooperation with Congress and

others results in Democrats affording trust to the government via their affect toward the president – a kind of “halo effect” that focuses persons’ affect on the president, while further projecting those positive feelings and trust onto government as a whole. Without their affect toward the president, Democrats’ trust in government plummets – particularly during Democratic presidencies.

A different picture comes into focus when we examine the data for Republicans. Whether affect toward the president is controlled or not, Republicans still maintain a significantly higher level of trust with a Republican president than with a Democratic one. Examine what happens from Figure 5 to Figure 7 when affect toward the president is controlled. While Republicans’ mean level of trust drops during both Republican and Democratic presidencies (as it does for all party identification groups), Republicans’ trust in the government remains significantly higher during Republican administrations. Thus, their trust in the government from one party’s administration to another is not contingent upon their personal feelings toward the president. Trust in government for them remains higher during Republican administrations regardless of how they feel toward the president. This suggests that Republicans are more likely to view the president as independent and less constrained by the ambiguous reification of “government.” This perspective focuses on the autonomous power of the president and his above-the-fray, symbolic function as “*the president*.”

In short, the difference between Republican and Democratic conceptions of the president’s role in government can be explained by the difference between the man and the institution. Republicans see “the president, the man.” As such, he is independently evaluated from the government and feelings toward him do not necessarily reflect trust in the larger institution. Democrats see “the president, the institution.” In this case, the president is a

functional part of a larger whole and thus feelings toward him extend in the form of trust to the federal government.

5.2 Limitations

Chronicities. One of the limitations of this study is that it does not account for individual cognitive processes. Erber and Lau (1990) suggest that the influence of persons' perceived characters and economic issues will vary from voter to voter depending on that voter's cognitive structure, or what the researchers refer to as "chronicities." Erber and Lau argue that individuals are cognitively oriented to certain perspectives when they evaluate their president. Depending on this cognitive orientation, individuals will give different weight to both image and issues in evaluating the president. Those who are more image-oriented possess a "person chronicity" and will give greater weight to the president's personal characteristics and personality traits. On the other hand, those who possess an "issues chronicity" are more issues-oriented will take legislative performance and issue stances under more careful consideration (Erber and Lau 1990:238). Consequently, their levels of political trust will be based on different criteria.

Effect of Media. Another limitation of this study is that it does not measure the amount or type of media respondents consumed. As Hetherington (1996) and others (Shah et al 1999) have demonstrated, the media's role in framing economic conditions is a significant factor in constructing the public's perception of the economy's wellbeing. The media serves as our ultimate gatekeeper to information on national events. In an age of sensationalism and profit-driven headlines, one is left to question the motives of media outlets. We are left to question whether reporters, editors, and news companies have ulterior motives (e.g., political motives,

profit motives) that may taint the fairness of a story. For example, such motives may result in an unfairly negative framing of the economy or an inflated, positive view of the president.

Historical Context. A further limitation of this study is that it does not provide a useful historical context for the data. The data presented here paint a very broad picture of trust, extending over six presidential terms with four different presidents. This makes it susceptible to misinterpretation. Of particular question are the results that highlight Republican presidencies (i.e., that trust is higher, perceptions of the economy are more positive, and that affect toward the president is warmer). Further analysis should be performed, examining a series of interaction terms designed to measure the interaction of individual year and party identification.

I would expect that a number of historical occurrences and conditions, which are not measured in this study, have created the picture this data suggests. During the Reagan years, for example, I argue that Americans felt closer to the government because America was entrenched in a war on communism during the Reagan administration. Americans chose to trust their government in the face of the Soviet threat. While one should not diminish the undeniable appeal of Ronald Reagan, the importance of the choice that Americans had between standing with their government and sympathizing with the enemy is equally undeniable. This same phenomenon, incidentally, can be found during the first Bush presidency and the Gulf War.

The popularity of the Carter presidency, on the other hand, was hindered by a number of factors including inflation, gas crises, and – in particular – one heavily-televised event. Every night for 444 days, news anchors including the widely-trusted Walter Cronkite tallied the days of the hostage crisis in Iran, constantly placing the lingering problem at the forefront of Americans' attention who would write Jimmy Carter's pink slip. He would be defeated in a landslide victory by Ronald Reagan in 1980.

In the case of the Clinton administration, the data in this study once again fall short of capturing our measures of interest in their proper historical context. The Clinton administration saw the media report on many different events than its Republican predecessors did. This presidency was plagued by scandal even before Bill Clinton took office. Headlines highlighting Whitewater, Gennifer Flowers, Paula Jones, Monica Lewinsky, and others grabbed headlines throughout Clinton's two terms (1992-2000), prompting widespread debate about the morality of the president and eventually culminating in Clinton's impeachment. During the eight years of the Clinton presidency, there were no wars against a demonized aggressor to encourage a sense of unity among American citizens as there were in the twelve years prior. On the contrary, the dynamic created by volatile opposition from congressional Republicans and the fervent rebuttal from the Democratic administration fueled perception among Americans that Washington had become a bastion of cutthroat, ignoble, vindictive politics. All of these contextual conditions not measured by this study may help explain why some of our measures – particularly of trust and affect toward the president – are positively correlated with Republican presidencies.

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